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# Social Reproduction as Language Policy: The Neoliberal Co-option of English in Global Japan

In Japan, neoliberal discourses rationalize English language proficiency as a pathway to meritocratic reward and success in the global knowledge economy. With this ideology in mind, this review engages the market orientation of English domestically and the causative implications of class-distinguished capital. Specifically, Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction is employed to foster comprehension of Japanese foreign language policies in which English substantiates itself as a valuable source of cultural investment. Notwithstanding the supposedly meritocratic intention of the Japanese state, this study concludes that credentialism, hierarchization, and marketization function in concert with a *survival of the fittest* corollary that, per globalized ideological-discursive assumptions, constrains agency through the justification of ELL as a vocational and civic moral worth. This conflation of internationalization and Englishization is better understood as an instrument of dominance, with the agency to participate in ELL interlocking with an incontrovertible doxa that rationalizes the economic, social, and political hierarchy.

**Keywords:** Neoliberalism; Globalization; Social Reproduction; Bourdieu; Japan

## Introduction

It is broadly acknowledged that neoliberalism and its correspondent ideologies exert a significant impact on global society. Classically interpreted as an economic model, the reality of market-orientated reform is such that its practice represents a highly complex process of tension and accommodation, encompassing not only the financial but the social, political, and environmental domains. At its base, neoliberalism may be interpreted as the “arrangements within society that emphasize market relations, re-tasking the role of the state, and individual responsibility” (Springer et al., 2016, p. 2) and, from this perspective, it is embedded in globalization and the dynamic practices of governance under the capitalist market economy.

While the currently dominant neoliberal paradigm is often viewed as an Anglosphere-originating phenomenon, its supremacy is such that non-native English-speaking states are compelled to contribute to its developmental model via outward-orientating educational policies emphasizing the cultivation of transnational human capital and the “paradigmatic soft skills of communication” (Urciuoli, 2008, p. 212). Consequently, globalized states have assigned asymmetrical rates of economic and cultural capital to English as a foreign language

(EFL), structuring their linguistic fields so that the language is interpreted as correlating directly with both individual and national economic development.

The relationship between English and Japanese educational policy plays a crucial yet polarizing role in debates surrounding class-conscious resources that, in the context of globalization, facilitate access to selective higher education institutions (HEIs) and choice employment beyond them. These reforms include *yutori-kyōiku* (“relaxed” or “no pressure education”), a decentralization initiative emphasizing flexibility and individuality which occasioned an expansion in financially prohibitive English-medium schools; the current *Top Global University Project (TGUP)*, which extends the global focus of élite—and, thus, highly stratified—Japanese HEIs in order to develop internationalized human capital; and, most recently, a late 2019 proposal by the Japanese Government to fully privatize EFL proficiency tests as part of standardized university entrance assessment.

Slater (2010) describes Japanese decentralization policies as extending the class divide. With *yutori-kyōiku*, TGUP, and private EFL assessment visibly orientated towards a competitive middle and upper class, the natural consequence is a socioeconomic barrier to highly-coveted forms of capital. In responding to claims of systematic educational stratification, Japanese education minister Koichi Hagiuda sparked outrage when asserting that learners should compete for university placement “in accordance with their [financial] standing” (Kyodo, 2019). In doing so, Hagiuda cast doubt on the implicit link between free-market reform and meritocratic competition (Lauder et al., 2006, p. 27). Indeed, stratified HEI markets within the global knowledge economy anchor to the normative power of neoliberalism and, in this context, a Social Darwinist “survival of the fittest” corollary that legitimates the exclusion of the disadvantaged.

Consequently, this study employs Bourdieu's concept of social reproduction to foster a theoretical comprehension of market-orientated EFL strategies operating through a system of credentialism, hierarchization, and national identity formation. In this manner, state and industry-sanctioned English language learning (ELL) expedites "social, material, and institutional benefits for those whose language use is viewed as 'ideal' through these biases" (Chang-Bacon, 2020, p. 5) while disadvantaging citizens whose linguistic proficiencies are aberrant. At the heart of this investigation is an endeavor to reveal free-market ELL policy as contributing to class hierarchization locally, with the neoliberal dogma of "freedom of choice" failing to account not only for the stratified forms of capital that facilitate English proficiency but the ideological agendas that constrain agency in such a manner that "choosing" ELL is conditional as opposed to free (Phillipson, 2011).

### **Background: The Context of Foreign Language Learning in Japanese Higher Education**

Amano (1997), Kariya (2010), and Okada (2001) note the perception of Japan as an egalitarian yet highly credentialized society that invokes a state of intense academic and professional competition among its citizens. It is commonly accepted that, through the application of effort within this outwardly meritocratic system, learners generate life chances equal to their credentialed resources, irrespective of class background or social origin (Kariya, 2010). In pursuing the same logic, failure in education may be attributed to an absence of ambition, aptitude, or merit. Nevertheless, this democratic reading of effort-based reward fails to place Japanese higher education (HE) in a broader socio-political and, in the case of the market-orientated state, *industrial* context. Mizuno (2008) and Nowlan (2019) both note that tertiary EFL policy locally orientates itself towards state and corporate demands, ordinarily via "neoliberal discourses [which] emphasize that it is the responsibility of the individual to acquire the information and skills, including communication or language ability, that are considered important for the new knowledge economy" (Horiguchi et al., 2015, p. 3).

Indeed, learner investment in English has been heavily promoted by Japanese companies requiring multilingual human resources for the purpose of international expansion (Murata, 2015). Against this background, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's (MEXT) ten-year TGUP strategy aims to enhance the internationalization of 37 leading Japanese universities so that graduates may, according to Mami (2014), "walk into positions of global leadership." Such policies "have been implemented alongside, and have been driven by, business sectors calling for radical change" (Horiguchi et al., 2015, p. 4). Nevertheless, Kamikubo (2013) notes that the quintessential laissez-faire discourse of self-guided growth found throughout the Japanese vocational sector allows employers to evade their financial commitment to the development of globalized (read: Englishized) human capital. Concurrently, MEXT has faced decades-long criticism regarding the standard of its compulsory ELL with specific regard to the efficacy of content and instruction (Hosoki, 2011), leading many parents to seek expensive private ELL for their children. If a citizen is to secure employment at a multinational corporation, they must hold the appropriate credentials—a degree from an élite HEI which, in and of itself, requires demonstrable proficiency in English during a highly-selective (and, thus, hierarchized) screening processes.

### **Theorizing the Relationship Between Neoliberalism and "Global" English**

The prominence of Anglospheric cultural knowledge within the global economy has strengthened market interest in language institutions, consolidating the relationship between neoliberalism and ELL via ideological and discursive measures that, as described by Pennycook (2017), contextualize global English as "natural, neutral, and beneficial" (p. 9). Despite its neocolonial imposition, the normative association between English as a lingua franca (ELF) and the US-driven neoliberal paradigm encourages the interpretation of English spread as a *natural* occurrence. English is viewed as *neutral*, meanwhile, as it is widely held

that if the language disassociates from its original Anglospheric context, it is by some means transformed into a socio-culturally independent mechanism of communication (thereby failing to recognize the potential for epistemic inequality within intercultural contexts). Finally, the idealistic vision of English as a wholly *beneficial* lingua franca stems from its perceived utility as a vehicle for economic development and global communication; nevertheless, this interpretation neglects to account for an *English divide* (or stratified degrees of access to the language) and thus, the potential for ELL to transpire via socially inequitable mechanisms (Pennycook, 2017).

One may thereby interpret global English as a manifestation of *symbolic violence*. Bourdieu employs the term to describe those soft, or non-physical, forms of domination manifesting per hierarchized power differentials. As noted by Ritzer & Stepnisky (2017), this process is soft “because the agent against whom it is practiced is complicit in its practice” (p. 189); it is exercised indirectly, primarily via socio-cultural systems, and expands upon the more unambiguous interpretations of power theorized by Marxist scholars. Indeed, Phillipson (2011) views global English as an exemplar of *linguistic imperialism*, or “the dominance of English asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages” (Phillipson, 1992, p. 47), in which centrist<sup>1</sup> actors, including English-speaking leaders of politics, business, and the economy, exert symbolic power over the remainder of the populace, or periphery.

Outwardly, Bourdieu’s concept reveals a notional consistency with Gramsci’s (1992) theory of cultural hegemony. From this perspective, market-driven EFL policy represents a distinct form of repression, blending force and consent via coercive measures that rationalize

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<sup>1</sup> The centre–periphery model is a spatial metaphor which attempts to account for the relationship between an advanced or cosmopolitan “centre” and a less developed or structurally constrained “periphery”.

the current social, political, economic, and *linguistic* status quo. Nevertheless, while Gramsci and Phillipson posit that hegemony emerges via the consensual “acceptance” of an élite-driven cultural orientation as broadly aiding subaltern populations, Bourdieu hypothesizes that submission to dominance is not an issue of cognizance, but those durable, deep-rooted schemes of perception and appreciation inherent to one’s embodied disposition. Thus, EFL stratification secures itself via a symbolic-discursive process transposing social distinctions into an affirmation of linguistic advantage subconsciously acknowledged as an intrinsic characteristic of the dominant. In this regard, state and market systems emphasizing EFL as a conduit to personal development represent core institutions through which symbolic violence is practiced.

In the broad sense, education markets imbricate in extant class and power relations, playing a prominent role in the negotiation and structuring of society via the reproduction of hierarchy. In considering the institutionalized nature of ELL throughout the periphery, which, in its most coveted form, functions via expensive private tuition and assessment, and admittance to élite HEIs and study abroad programs, EFL serves as a form of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1979), concurrently privileging those actors possessing convertible linguistic capital and limiting those who do not. Accordingly, the symbolic violence derived from hegemonic language transmission reinforces positions of power by conditioning subaltern groups to take for granted “the legitimacy of that which dominates them” (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2017, p. 189).

Following Pennycook (2017), English tied to neoliberal forces should not be considered a universally natural, neutral, and beneficial agency of trans-cultural communication; conversely, it “remains inextricably interwoven with its economic and social origins” (Holborow, 1993, p. 358). Aptitude for EFL is recognized internationally as a point of ingress to essential societal domains, including education, trade, politics, and the economy; it thereby represents “a value one identifies with for the social functions the language is seen

as serving, its utility in the linguistic market” (Phillipson, 2009, p. 109). The neoliberal-orientated conflation of internationalization and Englishization may be better understood as an instrument of dominance, with the agency to both support and engage in ELL interlocking with an incontrovertible doxa that covertly serves to rationalize and regulate hierarchy. Accordingly, critical inquiry must place English within a “broader framework of policy, politics, and ideology” (Yamagami & Toffelson, 2011, p. 33) if it is to understand the language’s hegemonic position fully.

### **Theoretical Lens: Social Reproduction and Bourdieu’s “Thinking Tools”**

Given this analysis leverages Bourdieu’s concept of *cultural reproduction*, an understanding of the interrelated *habitus*, *capital*, *field*, and *doxa* is crucial when attempting to reconcile the impacts of subjective experience and external structures on actors—particularly in the context of *social reproduction* or the maintenance and replication of hierarchical systems and structures based on certain preconditions, such as education and social origin. In this regard, cultural reproduction may be understood as the social processes utilized to generate, circulate, and naturalize dominant cultural values. Central to this process is habitus, which represents the behaviors, attitudes, and tastes inherited and developed through inherited social class and ongoing life experiences. These dispositions are *durable*, in the sense that they endure for protracted periods, and *transposable*, on account of their capacity to manifest within a multiplicity of societal domains (Bourdieu, 1989). In this manner, linguistic habitus represents the corporeal arrangement of “objective structures” (p. 662), “determined initially by one’s socially accumulated linguistic competencies, before assimilation into a distinct cognitive and somatic disposition” (Smith, 2019, p. 6).

Against this background, language interweaves in “power struggles over what is and what is not regarded as acceptable and valuable” (Zotzmann, 2013, p. 253). As actors inhabit differentiated positions within distinct societal domains (or *fields*), how they utilize native and



foreign languages is likewise stratified, with linguistic varieties measured positively or negatively contingent on their perceived social value. The interplay between capital, habitus, and the specific orthodoxy, or “rules of the game,” labeled by Bourdieu (1977) as *doxa*, determines one’s position and interactions within a field (whether present or potential). In this context, *doxa* constrains social mobility, strengthening the tolerance of social hierarchies and “sense of one’s place” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 466) by characterizing certain cultural products as appropriate or inappropriate within the context of social orientation. Consequently, Bourdieu (1977) interprets the principles of language and economic markets as homeomorphic, involving the negotiation and exchange of linguistic capital subject to variation in worth. Fields, therefore, serve as spatial domains in which power is generated and regulated, dispositions are expressed and reproduced, and the various forms of capital are accrued and contested.

Bourdieu (1986) evolves capital beyond its financial application to integrate socio-cultural elements, also. Whereas economic capital constitutes tangible assets directly convertible into money (Bourdieu, 2006), social capital is inextricably bound to an actor’s durable social network and, crucially, the obligations and opportunities generated through the mobilization of these connections (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 56). Finally, cultural capital subsists in three forms—institutionalized, embodied, and objectified—and is used to account for symbolic assets, both material and immaterial, attained per one’s position in society, thereby constituting “an implicit currency traded during the navigation of culture” (Smith, 2019, p. 7).

Defined by Bourdieu (1986) as the formal recognition of one’s cultural proficiency (educational credentials, for example), institutional capital may, in turn, generate economic capital through employment. The aggregation of capital in its embodied state, meanwhile, assumes a process of manifestation in which knowledge and states of being are both passively inherited and consciously developed via socialization. As outlined by Bourdieu (1986, pp. 244–245), embodied cultural capital is not transferred instantaneously but secured over a

prolonged period via habitus. Linguistic capital is itself an extension of capital in its embodied state owing to the impact of enculturation during language acquisition. Finally, the objectified expression of cultural capital identifies itself by the “cultural goods” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243), such as technology, literature, and works of art, appropriated to materially and symbolically differentiate one’s degree of capital within the context of taste.

Vital to capital utilization is the process of conversion and intergenerational reproduction amongst its forms (Bourdieu, 2006, p. 114). As with other types of currency, cultural capital may be saved, invested, or bartered during the acquisition of resources (Kingston, 2001). Regarding education, scholastic and linguistic achievement exert a meaningful impact on social reproduction via the “hereditary transmission of cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 244). Indeed, the socio-culturally-determined yield of education is governed not only by the institutional worth of one’s professional or academic recognition but the social network one may activate to participate in, or benefit further from, said education. This interconnected process represents a central determinant in inclusion and exclusion, enabling cultural-economic capital conversion via participation in coveted professional domains, which, in sequence, facilitates the hereditary diffusion of economic and cultural capital through enduring filial networks. Kingston (2001), therefore, recognizes educational markets as both receptive to and reflective of “the cultural orientation of the dominant class” (p. 89).

### **Internationalization, Decentralization, and “Meritocracy” in Japanese Education**

As noted by Piller and Cho (2013), the supremacy of global English is generated and reinforced “by an interlocking set of socioeconomic agendas dissimulating their operation” (p. 38) that, far from being the outcome of a “free linguistic market,” generate via a “systematic, organized, and orchestrated policy” (Piller & Cho, 2013, p. 38) that serves to establish the illusion of choice and meritocratic participation. As in many post-global locales, MEXT rationalizes this development as necessary to transnational activity and, more broadly, the

Japanese state's economic competitiveness and well-being (Yamagami & Tollefson, 2011). Both Kubota (1998) and Nowlan (2019) characterize this relationship as intersecting with Japanese internationalization (*kokusaika*) reforms following the country's rapid economic growth and subsequent liberalization of trade and capital. While the political rhetoric of the post-war decades had focused on *kindaika* ("modernization") "and a cultural emphasis on the need for individuals to put the national good before their personal desires" (Goodman, 2007, p. 71), it was clear that, by the 1980s, Japan was a prosperous and modern nation which, upon recovering from the 1980-1983 global recession that impacted many fellow OECD members until the second half of the decade, became the world's largest creditor state.

More recently, the usage of *kokusaika* occurs alongside, and is sometimes superseded by, the term *gurōbaruka* ("globalization" or "interconnectedness") and, while functional differences between these words in their anglicized forms may appear semantic, they not only remain distinct within the Japanese linguistic and political contexts but, upon closer examination, expose a complex relationship between EFL and Japanese nationalism. While *kokusaika* and *gurōbaruka* both manifest through tensions between Japanese cultural sovereignty and the pressures of internationalization, Burgess (2010) notes, "the latter demands passive compliance with external norms that Japan is unable to control, whereas the former actively pushes back against perceived threats to Japanese identity." In this connection, *kokusaika*-driven ELL supports an outward-facing orientation with internationalization—and thus, the doxic relationship between neoliberalism and global human capital development, referred to locally as *jinzai*<sup>2</sup> (Kubota, 2015)—while paradoxically emphasizing an inward-orientated push towards protectionism. Fujita-Round and Maher (2008), too, note that "the logic of internationalization implies, tendentiously, educating Japanese people to behave 'more

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<sup>2</sup> *Jinzai* refers to the utilization of the education system to generate the global human capital that enhances Japanese competitiveness within the global economy.

Japanese’ as well as equipping them with the linguistic armor to compete in the world beyond Japan” (p. 495). This conflict is evidenced in MEXT’s (2003) strategic plan to cultivate “Japanese with English abilities,” which states:

“With the progress of globalization in the economy and in society, it is essential that our children acquire communication skills in English, which has become a common international language, in order for living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This has become an extremely important issue both in terms of the future of our children and the further development of Japan as a nation” (MEXT, 2003).

Linked to Social Darwinist ideologies “of national power and aggressiveness for survival” (Lee et al., 2010, p. 343) that uncritically justify the logic and capital of English, the policy came under sustained criticism by Japanese citizens. They countered that young learners should first be proficient in their mother tongue before exposure to a burdensome foreign language. In consequence, MEXT stressed that EFL education would not only strengthen Japan globally but, optimistically, “lead to a deeper understanding of Japanese language and culture” (Burgess, 2010). The Ministry’s cultivation of ELL thereby reflects trends of resistance and accommodation in which Japan attempts to protect itself from external influence while simultaneously accruing the physical and cultural resources necessary for international competitiveness. The outcome, as suggested by MEXT’s strategic plan, is that “opening up” to internationalization—more specifically, *Westernization*—occurs synchronously with a “closing in” (Burgess, 2010).

Indeed, while the impact of external hegemonic structures on *gurōbaruka* reform is apparent, the dominance of English within the HE foreign language sector is, nevertheless, far from unique to the Japanese context. This relationship evidences itself in neighboring China (Hu, 2005), Korea (Samuell & Smith, 2020), and Singapore (Tang, 2018; Yamagami &

Toffelson, 2011), underlining “how strong the global pressure towards the use of English has become” (Tsuneyoshi, 2005, p. 67). In all instances, Pennycook’s (2017) natural, neutral, and beneficial fallacies emerge as key drivers of nation and human capital building; yet, paradoxically, the imbrication of ELL policy within the global context strengthens the cultural dominion of the Anglosphere via hegemonic paradigms “that consolidate Anglophonic power in the information society and the knowledge economy” (Phillipson, 2011, p. 442). Of thirteen major intergovernmental trade and finance organizations (including the International Monetary Fund, OECD, and World Bank), twelve feature English as an official language, while interpretation into Japanese is offered by only two (Coulmas, 2017, p. 121). The implication is clear: speak English or risk disadvantage within the international arena.

Nevertheless, as Bourdieu & Passeron (1990) stress, “it is only by sheer force of ideology that one can present the ‘needs of the economy’ or of Society as the rational, reasonable basis for a consensus on the hierarchy of the functions incumbent upon the educational system” (p. 185). Following MEXT’s ELL mission statement, discursive assumptions that broadly rationalize the doxic, inequitable relation between the centre and periphery, and Japanese speakers of English and non-speakers, in particular, serve to condition the habitus into construing EFL proficiency as an expression of moral and civic worth. If, as postulated by MEXT (2003), Japanese speakers of English contribute to the “development of Japan as a nation,” such rhetoric, vis-à-vis, discredits actors who do (or *can*) not conform to state-driven collectivist demands. More pointedly, this human capital development model functions to instrumentalize English as a terrain by which “individuals and institutions *must*<sup>3</sup> compete to be deemed meritorious” (Piller & Cho, 2013, p. 39).

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<sup>3</sup> Emphasis not present in original text.

Still, Horiguchi et al. (2015) posit that *gurōbaruka* reform “has generally been invested in a small and competitively selected top tier of society” (p. 4); a divide evidenced in the multi-phase *yutori-kyōiku* “relaxed education” era of 1980-2010. Initially conceived in response to a 1971 OECD advisory report suggesting Japan emphasize “the development of students’ personalities through a more flexible and less pressured scheme of education” (as cited in Bjork, 2009, p. 29), the policy’s terminology draws attention to a Western-neoliberal analog, *laissez-faire*, but also a functional parallel, given its intention to engender deregulation, meritocratic participation, and individuality. Nevertheless, by *yutori-kyōiku*’s mid-period (1992-2001), Japan had entered recession, with corporations asserting that Japan’s future economic position would be inextricably linked to learner creativity, which “should be ranked as the most desirable qualification” (Japan Committee for Economic Development, 1993, p. 285), with a corresponding emphasis on diversity and internationality.

Despite industrial calls for diversity and a superficially meritocratic intention, Poole and Takahashi (2015) describe *yutori-kyōiku* reform “as having been cause for the creation of a wider gap between the [poor and] privileged, wealthy groups able to afford to compete” (p. 97). MEXT’s 2003 *school district free system*, for instance, targeted high-achieving students outside of traditional catchment areas through *gurōbaruka*-focused schools within newly-defined “special zones.” Through liberalization, wealthy parents are presented a degree of “choice” in their children’s school, “with one of the key selection criteria being the schools ranking on standardized tests within that district” (Wada & Burnett, 2011). This process has exposed Japanese education to new market forces with a corresponding impact on enrolment. Indeed, the most pervasive influence on access to elite HEIs within Japan is “the academic focus and quality of the secondary school at which college preparation is conducted” (Ross, 2008, p. 7). Deregulation thereby serves as a gatekeeping mechanism, utilized to regulate

admission to selective secondary-level schools that act as feeding institutions to prestigious universities and “choice employment beyond them” (Ross, 2008, p. 7).

The school district free system led to an expansion of English-medium international schools delivering MEXT curriculum (highlighting the paradoxical context of “Japanese internationalization”) and exposure to the global through non-Japanese ELL faculty. Kubota (2011) notes that such schools “increased from 18 in 2001 to 293 in 2008” (p. 108) and, despite MEXT’s claims of meritocratic participation, it is apparent that learners from economically-privileged backgrounds are more likely to profit from the “possibilities of choice” (Gewirtz et al., 1995, p. 25) that correspond both overtly and covertly to class-differentiated taste. Tuition fees in yutori English-medium schools total “upwards of US \$10,000 per year per child” (Poole & Takahashi, 2015, p. 90) and, where pupils were once automatically granted entry to learning institutions within their respective district, students are required to undertake self-funded EFL testing to attend popular schools. As noted by Kariya (2009), institutions located within the lower-status socioeconomic wards of Tokyo, such as Shinagawa, have seen enrolment numbers fall significantly due to low test performance, putting them at risk of closure. The capacity to adapt to outwardly “meritocratic” yutori-kyōiku policies emphasizing English linguistic capital thereby remains class distinguished, with the ELL obligations imposed on local citizens proving wholly unrealistic to disadvantaged families.

The social advantage exercised by wealthy and educated families extends beyond the economic, however; parents from affluent backgrounds have a greater likelihood of possessing “the knowledge, skills, and contacts to decode and manipulate what are increasingly complex and deregulated systems of choice and recruitment” (Apple, 2006, p. 473). In the context of “relaxed” EFL education, economically privileged families may wield social and economic capital in many ways. For example, parents taking time off from work to visit and attend interviews at multiple institutions, owning cars to transport children to distant, yet desirable,

schools with a high success rate for admission to elite HEIs, and by providing educational advantages, such as computers, extracurricular camps, after-school ELL programs, and exam tutoring. An understanding of cultural capital also highlights the importance of “choice” during the capital conversion process, particularly within the context of value-added learning options, such as English immersion, that ensure learners absorb “an ‘ease,’ a ‘style,’ that seems ‘natural’ and acts as a set of cultural resources” (Apple, 2006, p. 473). In this manner, yutori schools enable the attainment of EFL capital that, given the dominant position of global English, generates “higher academic positions as well as upper or upper-middle-class careers and lifestyles” (Yoon, 2020, p. 197) while also conditioning the habitus to decode and successfully *reproduce* this knowledge, or embodied cultural capital, in the future.

The context detailed here is broadly reflective of the 1975 Hiraizumi-Watanabe debate, in which the *Jiyū-Minshutō* party’s Wataru Hiraizumi called for a reorganization of national EFL education that would have provided ELL “to an *élite*<sup>4</sup> set of students” (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006, p. 276), working under the assumption that EFL should be taught only to those students who “needed” it. In this historical context, Japanese education minister Koichi Hagiuda’s proclamation that learners should participate in ELL per their “standing” is crucial in understanding EFL’s social representation in Japan. Indeed, Yamagami and Tollefson (2011) note that “political discourse, as a type of elite discourse, plays a particularly influential role in the (re)production of social representations, which are a major factor in forming ideological systems (sometimes termed ‘public opinion’)” (p. 18). Deregulated ELL in Japan remains intimately connected to its learners’ socioeconomic origins, representing a mechanism of power relations through a practice of symbolic violence that strengthens the association between active citizenship, globalized EFL capital, and the symbols and doctrines reproducing

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<sup>4</sup> Emphasis not present in original text.



taste. Under the guise of internationalization, laissez-faire policy functions to exploit the ideologies of individualism and meritorious participation in foreign language education to the benefit of the socioeconomically privileged who can afford élite ELL and detriment of subaltern populations who cannot.

By rejecting state interference in the student selection process, the school free system undermines the very notion of reward-based competition, advantaging the children of Japanese professionals by orientating education towards “the material and cultural assets possessed by middle-class parents” (Lauder et al., 2006, p. 27). In restricting premium ELL amongst the underprivileged, symbolic violence and the “sense of one’s place” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 466) are strengthened—with the cultural-linguistic capitals tied to EFL driving ideological-discursive interactions that govern the social and, in the context of MEXT’s attempts at national identity formation, *moral* worth of Japanese citizens. The notions of “choice” and “effort” during yutori-kyōiku education and, more generally, ELL, thereby fails to account not only for the stratified degrees of capital that facilitate the English divide but also those ideological agendas that constrain agency “in such a way that ‘choosing’ English is contingent rather than free” (Phillipson, 2011, p. 449).

### **Credentialism, Corporatization, and Power in English Assessment**

Given the sensitivity of corporate Japan to English language proficiency and study at brand-name HEIs alike, one’s institutional capital in terms of EFL and alma mater can have lasting implications for future employability. Accordingly, the relationship between EFL assessment and élite tertiary education is symbiotic; the former facilitates the latter, which, in turn, enhances the possibility of attaining high-status employment. Given the credentialized nature of Japanese education (Kariya, 2010; Okada, 2001), families invest considerable resources in terms of finances and time when preparing children for the EFL component of the university entrance examination. If a student is initially unsuccessful in gaining admission to

an HEI high in institutional capital, it is common for learners to devote a year or more preparing to re-sit the test.

That families from socioeconomically privileged positions are more capable of leveraging material and symbolic resources within this hierarchical system of *juken jigoku*, or “exam hell,” is self-evident. Nonetheless, to further illustrate this disparity, research from the University of Tokyo (cited in Kubota, 2011, p. 108) indicates that “62.8 percent of the students from higher-income families (12 million yen [\$115,000<sup>5</sup>] per year or higher) entered four-year universities, compared to only 28.2 percent of those from lower-income families (earning less than 2 million yen [\$19,000] per year).” Additionally, the cost of self-funded EFL proficiency tests ranges from ¥5,800 (\$55) to ¥25,850 (approximately \$250), depending on the provider—which are themselves hierarchized based on brand recognition. Consequently, global English’s symbolic capital is commodified and class-distinguished relating to one’s degree of access to the social and institutional capitals required to succeed. The latter includes attendance at private language cram schools that, rather than enhance communicative competence, strengthen EFL test performance (Michaud & Colpitts, 2015) as the language normalizes within corporate Japan.

One may trace the relationship between EFL testing and Japanese industry to the 1963 introduction of the STEP, or Society for Testing English Proficiency, Test. Fujimoto-Adamson (2006) records STEP as the first nationwide EFL assessment measuring the four language skills. More pointedly, it represented “a reaction to the call for the introduction of more practical English made by business leaders” (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006, p. 275) to ensure that Japanese employees could conduct international trade during the nation’s industrial and economic boom of 1955–1972 (Imura, 2003). By 1979, the relationship between industry and assessment was

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<sup>5</sup> All Japanese Yen to US Dollars conversions employ rates of currency exchange accurate to December 2020.

strengthened further by the introduction of the US-developed, yet Japanese-envisaged, TOEIC business English test, which also provided a means of comparison between Japanese learners and those of other countries, such as via the OECD PISA test. While Japan's 1964 acceptance into the organization predated PISA by over three decades, the country was deeply engaged in OECD projects prior to this date and continues to be a robust supporter of OECD policies. As noted by Tasaki (2017), MEXT's neoliberal-Social Darwinist emphasis on cultivating the "ability to survive" in the mid-1990s coincided not only with yutori reforms, but corresponded directly with the OECD's "key competencies," including the "use [of] tools [languages] interactively, interact in heterogeneous groups, and act autonomously" (p. 146).

Kubota (2013), too, notes the impact of corporate practices on English assessment, observing that multinational companies Rakuten and Uniqlo require measurable proficiency in EFL during their recruitment processes but also proposed "English-only" policies, operating under the assumption that "English is a universal lingua franca and that English proficiency is indispensable for transcultural work" (p. 1). Indeed, Japanese enthusiasm for TOEIC, in particular, remains near unparalleled. In 1998, Japan (63%) and Korea (29%) accounted for 92% of all test-takers worldwide (ETS, 2000, p. 2). By 2005, overall Korean participation had dropped to 12%; yet, following MEXT's 2003 strategic reforms to cultivate "Japanese with English abilities" and accompanying deregulation of the school district system, Japan's global market share rose to 65% (ETS, 2006, p. 4).

While more recent overall participation figures are unavailable, the 2016 annual report recorded that 79% of all Japanese participants had taken the TOEIC test on multiple occasions compared to El Salvador's 17% (ETS, 2017, p. 26)—highlighting a significant disparity in terms of linguistic capital distribution between developed and peripheral nations. Nevertheless, given Japanese workers are seldom required to use ELF within their professional context—45% of Japanese TOEIC participants recorded using English during 1–10% of their daily lives (ETS,

2017, p. 21)–Kubota (2013) notes that this strand of English institutional capital holds a symbolic purpose, emphasizing the importance of EFL to global business, rather than any linguistic function. In this context, proficiency in English acts as an integral component of the worker’s idealized *jinzai* identity or, from a Foucauldian perspective, a symbolic capital that “is not so much about mere preparedness for employment or pure linguistic attainment as it is about living up to the vision of what constitutes the ideal human subject” (Park, 2010, p. 27).

English institutional capital within Japan demonstrates consistency with Olssen (1996), who describes the shift in subject position, from “‘*homo economicus*’<sup>6</sup> who naturally behaves out of self-interest and is relatively detached from the state, to ‘manipulatable man,’ who is created by the state and who is continually encouraged to be ‘perpetually responsive’” (p. 340). In making this connection, Olssen (1996) draws on the works of Michel Foucault (1995), specifically his description of disciplinary control through knowledge/power. For Foucault, knowledge and power do not occur autonomously; on the contrary, they are inextricably linked—knowledge is the application of power and power a function of knowledge. From this perspective, neoliberal educational policy (itself a demonstration of power) incites Japanese social actors to demonstrate proficiency in English through credentialism (produce knowledge), irrespective of the language’s vocational utility. Through this act of symbolic violence, “docile bodies” (Foucault, 1995, p. 138) in the form of linguistic-human capital are generated (again, knowledge), following which, agents insert themselves into hierarchies where the state monitors, develops, and redefines their broader linguistic habitus per corporate-neoliberal requirements (again, power). Thus, power is *productive*.

In considering the OECD’s (2006) assertion that “Japanese tertiary education policies have been significantly affected by the developed internal labor market within corporations”

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<sup>6</sup> Emphasis present in original text.

(p. 25), it is apparent that the doxic orientation of the market pressures social agents to participate in ELL to attain linguistic objectives that, in turn, function as a point of ingress to career advancement. Hence, the supposed necessity for English within the Japanese vocational sphere inflates the capital and worth of English within the linguistic market. In this regard, “free” or “agentive” involvement in ELL remains governed by the perceived value of English—discrediting further the presumed connection between market-orientated ELL policy and “choice.” Outwardly, the attention paid by Japanese HEIs and corporations to EFL institutional capital signals an interest in cultivating merit-based reward and global citizenship; yet, as noted by Horiguchi et al. (2015), “a million or so university students have *no choice*<sup>7</sup> but to study English” (pp. 6-7). Indeed, the OECD (2006) notes that “it is often difficult for the [Japanese] tertiary education graduate to immediately engage in [international] business activities... unless that individual has a special talent for or makes extra *effort*<sup>8</sup> in their English ability” (p. 110).

As Bourdieu hypothesizes the function of doxa as those accepted or communal values constitutive of a field which are taken-for-granted, the orthodoxy of the “credential ladder” (Lauder et al., 2012) is such that there is an expectation of the Japanese state and corporate bodies to provide higher education and vocational opportunities if citizens invest proportionately in ELL. As noted by Lauder et al. (2012), however, “the process of selection and stratification in education always produces inequalities that cannot be justified on the basis of merit” (p. 4). Given the previously described economic, cultural, and social capital required to attain “appropriate” EFL credentials—and the status of “ideal” citizen—the ideological basis

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<sup>7</sup> Emphasis not present in original text.

<sup>8</sup> Emphasis not present in original text.

of English locally is such that it is “constituted by and [serves to] continuously reconstitute the interests of the dominant classes in society” (Piller, 2015, p. 5).

### **Survival of the Fittest: The Impact of TGUP on HEI Hierarchization**

Participation in Japanese tertiary education trails an inescapable logic regarding the structures of competition, with learners vying for admission to brand-name HEIs to enhance the institutional recognition of their cultural capital. Within this system of “degreeocracy” (Okada, 2001), it is not the specific department, degree path, or standard of qualification that is the most important factor for prospective students; it is the institutional capital connected to the HEI itself on account of multinational corporations focusing their recruitment strategies overwhelmingly towards élite colleges. As noted by Amano (1997), this strengthens the educational hierarchy, with Japan viewed not as “a ‘what level’ credentialing society so much as a ‘what institution’ credentialing society” (p. 56). Additionally, Wada and Burnett (2011) observe that a 2004 decentralization of the Japanese university system converted 87 highly-ranked universities to self-governing corporations. The inevitable outcome is top-tier HEIs possessing total autonomy in determining admission fees and selection criteria, with Japanese institutions ranked in hierarchical order corresponding directly with brand recognition and the collective assessment scores of their respective student bodies.

By 2013, Japan’s neoliberal culture of educational competitiveness led to private sector HEIs accounting for 80% of all tertiary-level learners (Amano, 2014), with Hammond (2016) suggesting that “contemporary forms of both internationalization and the university have shifted... towards a nationally-bounded economic orientation” (p. 556). A MEXT report (cited in Wada & Burnett, 2011) indicates reductions to HEI funding in the vicinity of one percent annually, putting many low-to-mid-tier institutions at risk of closure. One could thereby posit that Japanese universities do not necessarily focus on educational outcomes, but a cyclical process of league table “natural selection” to attain more capable students and faculty and, thus,

higher levels of funding. To achieve this, Japanese HEIs maintain a state-driven import-export orientation (Hammond, 2016) to enhance their recognizable institutional capital: colleges import EFL products, including faculty, study abroad participants, and content, while exporting Japanese learners and educational programs to international partnerships.

To encourage this *kokusaika* alignment, in 2014, MEXT allocated ¥7.7 billion (approximately \$72.2 million) to fund the TGUP, a scheme aimed at enhancing the international competitiveness of Japanese HEIs. To obtain funding, institutions must place highly in domestic university rankings, which, as noted by Yudkevich et al. (2015), requires “many years of consistently high-quality, specialized training and often the fielding of large, multimember teams, the development of unique strategies, and the reliance on high-cost equipment or facilities—being smart and rich helps” (p. 413). Predictably, MEXT (2014) prioritizes TGUP support towards those “world-class and innovative universities” that drive Japan’s academic reputation and human capital development which, as noted by Yonezawa et al. (2017) adhere to similar trends set by neighboring China (the 211 and 985 projects) and Korea (Brain Korea 21). Following this logic, TGUP provides funding to thirty-seven national and private HEIs that either lead the global transmission of Japanese education or demonstrate the “potential to be ranked in the top 100 in world university rankings” (MEXT, 2014) by engaging in internationally-recognized education and research. TGUP HEIs receive ¥200–500 million (approximately \$1.9–4.8 million) annually in additional funding and include the élite Kyoto, Osaka, and Tokyo Universities.

Crucially, TGUP emphasizes “outbound mobility in its goals to internationalize their domestic student body” (Rose & McKinley, 2018, p. 120) through increased study abroad participation. In doing so, MEXT seeks to develop *jinzai* human resources with a strong ability to communicate and interact within transnational contexts. Yonezawa (2014), too, notes MEXT’s concurrent intention to enhance Japanese learners’ vocational prospects and develop

the domestic labor market and performance of Japanese trade globally through EFL. MEXT's (2019) ten-year goals for TGUP include growing the 16,055 Japanese students who studied abroad in 2013 to 61,517 in 2023; students who meet foreign language proficiency standards increasing to 264,881 from 78,589; and, from an inbound orientation, non-Japanese language courses and faculty members rising to 55,928 and 21,842 from 19,533 and 12,401, respectively (MEXT, 2019). However, Rose and McKinley (2018) have criticized MEXT's TGUP targets for vagueness in terminology. One may interpret "study abroad" as a medium-to-long-term endeavor, for instance, over a semester or academic year; yet, it may also include short-term sojourns, such as two-week intensive ELL courses. Additionally, "students" with sufficient foreign language standards could include inbound international learners speaking a variety of languages.

While not explicitly mandated in MEXT guidelines, the conflation between internationalization and Englishization is evident. In focusing on the export of learners and research, TGUP strengthens the cultural capital of EFL given the language's role as the dominant lingua franca and its "near-monopoly of published academic research" (Rose & McKinley, 2018, p. 122). Likewise, TGUP HEIs depend on the external input of English and Anglospheric epistemologies through the internationalization of faculty, students, and educational practices. In this context, the centre-periphery model accounts for the unequal distribution, both locally and globally, of academic and linguistic resources within the Japanese HEI landscape. Broadly, HEIs within the Anglo-American "centre" occupy and regulate the means and resources of knowledge production, whereas Japanese "periphery" universities maintain a consumer-follower role. Nevertheless, as Lo (2011) note, periphery locales are more than willing to pursue this relationship in the name of global competitiveness and massification.

Dialogues surrounding market-orientated language transmission thereby oblige HEIs to struggle within these discursive boundaries, with the identification of feasible alternatives



to this regime of truth, and whether such visions are viable (or even desired) amongst TGUP institutions remaining an issue. As noted by Lo (2011), the construction of “centres within peripheries” (p. 209) is paradigmatic amongst East Asian states in response to the demand for globalized human capital and the “quest for world-class excellence in higher education sectors in... Japan, China and the four East Asian tigers (Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea)” (p. 209). Domestically, TGUP enhances the gap between those centrist “haves” who receive additional MEXT funding and, crucially, institutional recognition by learner-consumers and employers alike, and the peripheral “have nots” excluded from the project.

Data provided by MEXT (2014) states that sixty percent of HEIs were ultimately unsuccessful in their application for TGUP accreditation. Consequently, Mami (2014) notes that “a clear divide will emerge between those that are on the list and those that are not,” with lower-ranked HEIs less capable of overcoming institutional inertia and discarding educational norms that have been self-evident for a sustained period. It is not an issue of merely adding costly globalized infrastructure, but rather an institutional transformation of “their whole way of being, from the foundations” (Mami, 2014). More pointedly, the Social Darwinist “survival of the fittest” hierarchization of domestic HEIs through TGUP policy actively rejects previous OECD recommendations for MEXT to implement tertiary education “policies and instruments for stimulating a fitting internationalization strategy of *all*<sup>9</sup> institutions” (OECD, 2009, p. 86).

As described throughout this review, the reliance on English by brand-name TGUP institutions assumes a requisite degree of EFL cultural capital amongst prospective students. Considering the respective volume and worth of capital in its various forms differs by social class, it is apparent that the “linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits

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<sup>9</sup> Emphasis not present in original text.

the dominant culture” (Bourdieu, 1973, p. 80) constrains learners from subaltern backgrounds. That cultural capital distributes unevenly conditional to education and social class is supported empirically. Sullivan (2001) observed, “parental cultural capital is strongly associated with parental social class and with parental qualifications” (p. 909), which, in sequence, facilitated the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital through parental involvement in cultural activities, including reading (Sullivan, 2001). From this perspective, the possibilities of choice generated via hereditary social advantages, such as extracurricular ELL programs and tutoring, enhance the likelihood of involvement within the TGUP system. Given the logic of neoliberal competition, those excluded from the pursuit of EFL on the grounds of socioeconomic status cannot, in general, attain the cultural capital necessary to gain admission to elite HEIs; rather than an absence of ambition, aptitude, or merit, the failure of these learners is, for the majority, *inevitable*.

Nevertheless, the doxic conviction in individual responsibility and meritocratic participation dictates that the respective yield of education results from an actor’s capacity (or lack thereof) to succeed within the neoliberal knowledge economy. The ideological-discursive assumptions supporting this view legitimize the English divide, as those inheriting EFL cultural capital “deserve” their position within the social hierarchy—reflecting the “survival of the fittest” leitmotif present throughout the neoliberal discourse. It may also be reasoned that the association between EFL and TGUP HEIs perpetuates societal bias towards the aesthetic taste, or “high culture” (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 29), of the dominant class. English serves as a social code during the pursuit and practice of elite-orientated taste, in which the education system rewards learners for “demonstrating precisely that knowledge which they are unlikely to have gained within the school” (Sullivan, 2001, p. 910). “Knowledge” here does not refer to the learner’s demonstratable aptitude for English, but rather the linguistic habitus that drives their accumulation of capital and perception of EFL’s worth within the linguistic market. This

interpretation supports Bourdieu's (1973) allegation that "by doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give" (p. 80).

## **Conclusions**

In elaborating the socio-political structure of EFL in Japan, this critical policy review sought to explore ELL in a manner appreciative of the tensions arising from hegemonic educational markets within globalized settings. Consistent with Bourdieusian inquiry, the conceptualizations of practice offered here share as a commonality an emphasis on highlighting the dualisms produced by such markets; for example, "between subject and object, agency and structure, micro and macro" (Heimans, 2012, p. 372). In doing so, this inquiry intended to question the socio-institutional mechanisms that facilitate internationalized ELL in Japan and, per the "thinking tools" laid out by Bourdieu, "the inseparable, mutually constitutive interrelationship between social structures and institutions and an individual's way of being" (Lee et al., 2010, p. 341).

English in post-global Japan has long been interpreted as a symbol of meritocratic opportunity that simultaneously strengthens individual achievement and national competitiveness in the knowledge economy. The current and historical contexts detailed in this study, however, illustrate that neoliberal logics produce an ever-increasing marketization of educational institutions that distinguishes ELL as a mechanism for class-based differentiation. As Rubdy (2015) notes, English is "far from being a solution to the dismantling of 'unequal power' relations in the world. English is, in fact, often part of the problem" (p. 43). In this sense, deregulation of foreign language education strengthens hierarchical interactions between the privileged "haves" conditioned to recognize the capital and value of English and those "have nots" disadvantaged in cultural, social, and economic capital. Consequently, the neoliberal assumptions that justify the logic and practice of "EFL capital as a primary agent of

distinction” (Smith, 2019, p. 13) fundamentally conserve and disseminate “the very structure that has given rise to them in the first place” (Malik & Mohamed, 2014, p. 72).

Following Bourdieu, this investigation holds that “neoliberalism as doxa” (Chopra, 2003) is best resisted by exposing its social cost. While one cannot deny the functional realities surrounding ELF’s instrumentalization within the sphere of global communication, one must also acknowledge the processes by which EFL and English language education conform to pre-existing power relations. Indeed, the advantages generated by EFL proficiency are, for some, substantial; nevertheless, as noted by Piller and Cho (2013), “the costs of English to the common good are potentially much larger” (p. 39). Beyond the economic burden required to develop the linguistic capital deemed crucial to the “development of Japan as a nation” (MEXT, 2003), the association between EFL and meritocratic competition generates a substantial human toll. Realistically, only a competitively-selected class of institutions and individuals can achieve the collectivist vision of globalized (more accurately, *Englishized*) human capital. Nevertheless, in a terrain of credentialism, hierarchization, and marketization, a neoliberalist “survival of the fittest” doxa structurally constrains agency amongst Japanese citizens through the justification of ELL as a requisite professional competence and, from a quasi-nationalist perspective, civic moral worth.

Ultimately, the drive to create globally-orientated human capital has coincided with a crunch for resources within a highly marketized education system. Instituted structures that function to sustain the illusion of neoliberal meritocracy, in which development of the self and universalized competition produces high-level education and careers, legitimize the imposition of English as a mechanism of privilege reinforcement. In disseminating the properties of free-market practices, educational and vocational institutions assert and fortify the foreign language policies of the Japanese state. By neglecting socioeconomic disparity among learners, the Japanese state, in parallel, facilitates the privilege of the globalized Japanese élite, reinforcing

the “sense of one’s place” through a process of symbolic violence that strengthens the symbols and doctrines reproducing *taste*. This reproduction of neoliberal authority, in which the various manifestations of EFL capital integrate themselves within the normalized logics of Japanese society, thereby adds credibility to Bourdieu’s (1991) claim that “the language of authority never governs without the collaboration of those it governs, without the help of the social mechanisms capable of producing this complicity” (p. 113).

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